

Telefunken

(or: A Spark Between Two Points)

‘Speak, memory!’

Vladimir Nabokov
Memoirs

‘Strictly no offloaders, skivs, leakers, anarchists, Creationists,
students, Muties, viroids, Emps, Lifers, Neuts, ex-Reds,
downsizers, Neogens, slagers, Reductivists, Eugen-vets,
mechdazers or Procloners’

‘Please obey the curfew. By Order of the Ministry of Peace –
Civic Duties (Implementation) Ordinance, 2352 SS/0127-88B’

(Large) Signs outside Maccadam’s Old Oil House™
(Flagship Store, New Iacon), 2356, the latter partially obscured by

‘Keep the Code!’

graffiti

‘First impressions?’
‘Comprehensive, if a little... *overwrought*.’
‘Detail is the mark of a true academic. Anything else?’
‘He’s not one of ours.’
‘...’
‘Commander?’
‘Just read it.’
‘Where shall I start?’
‘The beginning. Start at the beginning.’

I start the day blind.

Retnets widen with stim-surge and overburn; optic filaments are drenched with data; image systems swell to peak-heat as I ask them to absorb too much.

For a fleetingly eternal moment – the time it takes to recognise the feedback stinging my neural circuitry – Alpha Centauri bends the horizon line into heat bumps and blister curves. Perspective looses its grip, the sky is bruised with colour and my world becomes a single beam of light. I have to look away, and when I do the view from my balcony settles into its usual patterns and paradigms. Silhouettes coalesce into a template, a blueprint. I join the cityscape by dots, just as I do at the beginning of every solar cycle, every nascent sunrise. Follicles of light stretch across New Iacon, vibrant and naïve, trying to cleanse this careworn quadrant of fracture lines, trying to scrub away the fossilised decay.

Some things just cannot be rebuilt. The damage is inherent, entwined: conceptual. All you can do is smooth over the cracks and start again. The Cybertron of 2356 is good at starting again.

From this height I can see the city walls (unsurprising – you can see them from Moonbase 5). They’ve already become embedded in the landscape, as old as the nuke-pits in Tyrest, or the Yuss hinterlands. They’re starched and taut and buffed to a brittle shine, slowly eroded by the torque and side-slam of incessant grit-winds. Rodimus Prime (or Star Saber – who can be sure nowadays?) told the protesters that the walls went up to keep the ever-expanding Rad Zone – with its Muties, Emps and Viroids – away from our rejuvenated capital. Hence the guards, the cream of Sideswipe’s elite, patrolling the walls with proton cannons hoisted on their hips.

The sun climbs into the sky and I wonder; I stand here, outside my habitation unit, watching them walk along the battlements, and I wonder.

When did they start facing inwards?

‘By the Primal Caveat, I didn’t realise he was an *anarchist*!’

‘I think that here, commander, he is merely articulating the concerns of the student body. You’ll remember the Anti-Entrapment riots and the curfew protest.’

‘I remember – the recyc plant damn near overflowed with fresh slag.’

‘My point, commander, is that his thoughts are most likely the same as anyone from the Institute.’

‘Not everyone from Chromedome’s blasted Institute kills an Autobot in cold blood and flees the city.’

‘Point taken. Shall I continue?’

‘Hm. This background stuff is inconsequential – it doesn’t tell us where he may have gone. Skip forward to the Rodimus debacle.’

I always thought the world would be a much larger place without the Decepticons. Instead it has contracted, like an open wound re-stitched. City walls formalise territorial boundaries none of us thought would exist after the Software Wars in 2299, and carving the planet into hermetic environments. Do the citizens of Polyhex, Novena or Tene think the same as I do? And if they did, would anything change? Metalhawk, Perceptor and Seisor are in thrall of Rodimus Prime (or Star Saber, or Springer – is there any

way of telling them apart anymore?), and slippery, nebulous things like freedom can wait while there's peace to enforce.

Rumour has it that Galvatron is still alive, although the more naïve among us ask how he could have survived the injuries he sustained that day in Polyhex. I remember the fistfuls of rust-red wiring, the laserburns, the epidermal ruptures and the shimmy of sparks and blast-marks – but then I've seen worse. I remember him in 2147, crushed to a fragment when Xerxes collapsed; I remember the last few orms of 2013, back from Aquaria, when I saw what he was really capable of. But even if I hadn't seen these things, I would imagine him out there – just *waiting*, you know? Because rumour has it – and rumour rarely lies.

It occurs to me that if anything, I am a student of rumour. In these pressurised days of speed-learn and download packs, when the accumulated knowledge of a civilisation can be programmed into your mem-net within decabreems, an appreciation of rumour – hearsay, speculation, gossip, call it what you will – is a subtle and demanding discipline. You can't enrol in the revamped Institute of Higher Programming, plug yourself into an interface socket and leave with a head full of half-truths and shadow facts. It takes time and patience. It takes cunning.

The majority of this browbeaten population has no idea what's really going on. I have. And I know what's out there.

But rumours are worthless without the occasional corroborative fact, and so today is a good day. My contact at the Ministry has come through, and I finally have permission from High Command to conduct the interview. How can they resist a hardworking student, fresh from the IHP, desperate to complete his thesis on *Comparative Evils and the Unicronian Lineage*? I smile at the irony as I leave my tungsten spire and head for the transmat lounge downtown, making a detour through the religious quarter.

It's always busy here, with Neuts and Offloaders exploiting the mood of righteous fervour. Everyone's looking for salvation now that the peace we fought so hard for has turned out like *this*. I didn't fight in the Eugenesis Wars or surround Nova Point in 2210 to have military police standing on every corner, or omniscient surveillance, or containment units and gun-turrets filling space between trader strands and dealer tables.

Daylight looses itself around here. I squeeze through the crowd, counting symbols, plotting lines of allegiance, mapping stats in my head. Funny how so few will admit to being an Autobot nowadays – I'm walking among Magnus' Reductionists (Quintesson worshippers – why would anyone believe that our race was constructed cold?), Procloners, Anticopyists, Creationists and probably a good few Neogens, but then you never can tell when it comes to *them*. The Brotherhood isn't here, of course, at least not in plain sight.

The Creationists intrigue me the most. The 'One True Origin' is seen as so outdated, so apocryphal, that only the foolish few dare to proclaim it as historical fact. Lessons from the past have not been learned because High Command is desperate to play everything down. Theoscientists and Timeliners at the Ministry use hard science to 'explain' religious occurrences (occurrences that I witnessed with my own eyes), and turn them into rumour.

Breaking the rhomboids of artificial light that spill from doorways and stepping over a Eugen vet (he carries a replica of his Inhib Chip in a little glass tube, like a leper with a bell), I head towards an evangelist holding court inside a cordoned-off area. I can barely hear him above the guttural hum of underground generators and the chatter of rotor blades from the Skyspies. A trader thrusts a tray of honeycombed fragments into my stomach and asks me to buy a 'genuine piece of the original Autobot City'. I laugh in his face – perhaps he's a Neogen – and push past. A genuine piece of Autobot City? Impossible – I was there. I saw it *happen*. There wasn't enough left to fill a tray.

Meanwhile, the speaker has attracted a sizeable crowd, the majority of them hardened Creationists who have reached the end of their transcontinental pilgrimage. Only circuit sects endorsed by High Command are allowed to journey through the Rad Zone to visit places of 'authenticated mytho-religious significance'. Sectarian members are passionate but not stupid. They'll visit Novum, Ibex and Tyrest, but not the Acid Wastes – some rumours are strong enough to dissuade the most loyal disciples. I loiter on the sidelines (always nice to hear what mechwaste the other side is spouting) and look at the shallow imprint in the ground, a footprint in wet sand, fenced off and doused in ultraviolet light, where Primon supposedly tore himself from the planetary fabric. I leave a little present – a token of my love for Primus – and then move on. It's a long way to Autobot City: E2 and besides, who knows whether my interviewee will make it 'til sunset?

‘This is reading like a travelogue, not the confessions of a hardened terrorist. The more I hear, the more inclined I am to call off the search.’

‘You may revise that opinion, commander. You may even think that our friend is behind the Turning.’

‘A murderer and a messiah?’

‘The two may not be mutually exclusive.’

‘Continue...’

I find it nestling between war memorabilia and dubious objets d’art – just where it belongs. Among flakes of *that* red paint, Ark fragments and shattered communicubes (does this trader *really* expect me to believe that this was the ‘cube Xaaron used to announce Springer’s construction?), it stands out as something of genuine value: an original Autobrand. It’s only when I examine it closely that I see the imperfections – badge-prints and fuse patterns inconsistent with the classic mould. I have to think back to my own badge, torn loose in the Edeus siege a few vorns back, before deciding that it’s right for the job.

I find a low-key Ingestion Chamber, away from the cameras and vidcorders. Hunched over a vial of non-corrosive Hypergrade (the Ministry prohibits anything stronger) and constantly checking the door, I make the necessary adjustments. All the time I think of Servion, and how my thesis will change things for the better. By the time I’ve finished, the badge has three new protrusions, but they look like screw threads rather than nitro-detonators.

‘There! Conclusive proof! His own datalog testifies to his guilt!’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘I’ll have Sideswipe widen the search and divert all borderline troops. We can turn this to our advantage and reinforce the city.’

‘Of course I agree, commander – and the search teams will return from his habitation unit shortly. Would you like to hear anymore of the datalog?’

‘Is it necessary?’

‘I know you find it of little overall importance, but the others – especially those under Springer’s command – are worried by the Turning. Perhaps it’s best if I give you the full picture.’

‘Very well.’

While I do not expect to simply walk into the Ministry – the most heavily fortified stronghold on Cybertron – I am surprised by the full-scale riot outside its entrance. I glimpse Sideswipe himself among the twist and turn of bodies, joyfully unloading his portable pathblasters into the crowd. His elite guards, matt black and stooped with weaponry, wade through the sparks and scissor-kicks, enjoying the clamour and glamour of inner city violence. It’s only when I skirt the periphery of battle that I realise the true nature of the fight: the Autobot guards are disbursing rival factions of Anticopyists and Procloners.

Altercations like this are not new, but they are growing more violent. Not a decadorn goes by without a fresh consignment of cadavers being liquefied at the recyc plant, and most of these can be traced to demos turning sour. When it comes to the rise of the Neogens tensions run high, and yet the vast majority of protestors, both for and against the alleged biomorphic experiments, risk their lives for nothing more than a rumour. Only a select few know the truth – and I am one of them.

The Neogen process was prefigured millions of years ago, when colonisation and the desire to spread across the planet outpaced natural birthing. Prime Nova established morphing centres where protoforms were encoded with artificial memories – subliminal survival techniques to ensure safety in the new colonies. When energon resources dwindled, and the Overlord issued a worldwide ban on biomorphing,

the process was quietly dropped. The tech-heads and oviparous scientists poured all their expertise into one last creation – an ‘old timer’ who carried the sum total of all their pre-fab memories. Kip, I think his name was. Or Kap. Something like that. He’s dead now, anyway.

By 2299, the global population numbered a few hundred thousand. The planet’s meagre energon supply could sustain no more, which is why people like me pledged support to the historic Treaty of Antimorphism signed by Autobots and Decepticons in 2302. But High Command never expected the Decepticons to honour their side of the bargain, and so initiated a covert repro-seeding program whereby fertile biomorphs – ‘Lifers’ – would secretly churn out malleable protoforms, slowly topping up the Autobot army in case war broke out. And so it goes on.

‘Newborns’ are trans-warped to E2 and tubed in deep-freeze stasis pods. Cerebro-scientists and neural engineers are the new historians, the new retro-prophets. They slave in transplant labs splicing mem-files into composite histories – and the new generation of Transformers (literally, Neogens) are secretly leased, one at a time, into remote, outlying settlements. High Command cover their tracks well. Neogens are embedded with mnemonic software that gives them a cohesive past, a false history complete with designer timelines and handcrafted, superimposed recollections. They each have a unique personal background as sprawling and complex as a Golden Ager, and you know why? Because that’s the ultimate security. Even the Neogens believe their past.

Some people – myself included – argue that this is all very unnecessary, and that quite apart from the energon problems, we already have a back-up population. After events in late 2012, the entire race was forced to give an emergency mind-scan in case, in Rodimus Prime’s immortal words, ‘the worst came to the worst’. But a few years later, the Anticopyists kicked up a fuss, picketing outside Autobase and arguing about the pitfalls of repro-science, plundered sparklines and corrupted biocodes. Rodimus agreed to bury the crystals. Not so long ago, Star Saber exercised ‘altruistic deceit’ (his favourite get-out clause) and had some L.O.N.C. lackeys recover the crystals. No one knows where they are now, not even me. Same goes for some of the Autobots who opposed the move...

And so I watch the fighting and wonder whether anyone knows what’s really going on. They turn their aggression inward while High Command, paranoid that the Decepticons are gathering in the wings, continue to stockpile a pre-programmed army, reared from birth, and hide them in polar quadrants. I sometimes think that one day the Neogens will outnumber us originals.

I’ve heard new rumours about Neogen experiments in the last few years – in fact, if you ignore the Judgement Day and J’nwan prophecies, they’re the most popular topic among the underground communities. I’ve heard descriptions of warped protoforms stacked high in sterile warehouses; of downsized Neogens (that would explain the sudden influx of Micromasters, the ones they found adrift in deep space – yeah, right); of scientists chanting as they work under ten thousand watt bulbs (*‘Maximum speed, maximum efficiency’*), of old school Autobots – people like Prowl and Nightbeat – trying to put an end to what is happening. I’ve heard that Star Saber’s personal logs – more classified than the location of the Matrix Flame – prove that he is siphoning the stronger protoforms into hiding to prepare for the inevitable Autobot civil war.

The strangest rumours, and therefore the ones I’m most inclined to believe, centre around Neogens who break their programming. The first ‘deviant’ was a product of sloppy workmanship, nothing more. He found gaps in his memory: contradictions, parallel events, *non-sequiturs*. He accessed classified archives and found no record of himself. Making contact with people like me, he discovered the truth about his origin. Appalled that his life was merely a jigsaw, a contrivance, he renounced the Autobrand and escaped into the Rad Zone.

Now they say he runs a new sect in Kalis, operating under a name derived from his creators’ work slogans. I don’t know how much of this is true. I don’t know whether he really does have the ability to detect fellow Neogens and biomorphically reproduce. Whatever. But they say he has amassed hundreds like him, and they’re waiting. Waiting for what, I don’t know – to take over the planet?

‘I thought this was supposed to be informative. You’re telling me things I already know.’

‘Do you not find this at all enlightening?’

‘I am... surprised that the experiments are once again known outside this building, but it is of little concern. We’ve had leaks before, and each time we’ve stemmed the flow.’

‘And the Kalisians?’

‘You yourself have ransacked Kalis a hundred times and found nothing. You mustn’t believe all that you hear – or read.’

The crowd disperses, leaving a thin black carpet of dead and dying. I pick my steps carefully, not wanting to tread lubricant into the Ministry foyer. It’s a lot smaller than it seems from the outside, but then some say the vacuum tubes go down to the Primal Chamber. A zealous guard frisks me, but all he finds is a datapad clamped to my thigh. Bodyscans drive search beams across my torso, crosshatching me in crimson, but the battered Autosymbol on my chest blinks innocently in the light. I’m through.

I stand in line and wait to be ushered into the teleport chamber, making notes on guard layout and exit points. My thoughts turn to my interviewee, Rodimus Prime, and how I’m going to approach this. Servion is growing impatient. Sixty orns elapsed between petitioning Springer and being granted an audience with the dying Autobot leader. And Prime *is* dying, no matter what the general public believes. Even if I didn’t know the truth, I’d wonder why he hasn’t been seen outside E2 for decades, why Springer and Star Saber now wield such authority, why High Command didn’t even pass comment on the quinquennial anniversary of the Software Summit. Hell, once Springer even referred to Rodimus in the past tense.

If what Servion says is correct – and why on Cybertron should I doubt the words of the High Priest? – Rodimus Prime is possessed. It makes my optics glow just to think about it: Real life, *bona fide* Unicronian possession. Prime is the Gateway. Prime is Key.

The guards lead me into the transmat chamber and I watch a flickering skein of compressed space settle into a flatbed of cool blue energy. I break the seal, feel the tug of split distance, and realise that in less than one orn, when I have delivered my thesis, the path will be set and the world will change. There will be no more Reductionists, for one thing. How can you argue a false doctrine when confronted with absolute proof?

‘Why have you stopped?’

‘I believe, commander, that from this point we can watch his progress on Autobot City’s security cameras.’

‘No, keep reading. It’s just getting interesting.’

I’ve never visited E2 before, so I can’t say whether the atmosphere has changed, but if it’s always been as bleak and oppressive as this, I’m glad I’m stuck in an Iaconian tower block. More guards greet me on arrival with a nod and a gesture. No one speaks. I use the stairs (they keep Prime in the basement) and imagine what it must be like outside. There are no windows – not downstairs, not upstairs, not anywhere.

I do not expect to be greeted by Springer but here he comes. He’s larger than I remember him, in fact he dwarfs me, but then a lot can change in a few hundred years. When I think about the body-upgrades and energon steroids, this lumbering, lime-green titan of tensile steel and curflex musculature makes a kind of queasy sense.

‘You’re here to see *him*, are you?’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.’

‘You have one joor, no longer.’ He comes closer, and his sweaty shadow engulfs me. ‘Any longer and I’ll have you removed – forcibly. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Absolutely.’

He turns to go, ducking under a ceiling support. Perhaps because he feels he hasn’t intimidated me enough, perhaps because he’s just in the mood, the Autobot leader elect turns and places his hand on my shoulder.

‘Rodimus does not look well. He’s recovering from a routine energon transfusion and he does not look well.’

I crane my neck to catch his bulging eye.

'You go inside the medivault, you have your little chat, and you leave.'

'One joor,' I say quietly.

'And when you get back to Iacon you tell everyone – quite truthfully – that Rodimus is in fine health.'

'I understand, sir.'

And with that, he saunters away. I compose myself outside the reinforced door and press my hand self-consciously against my chest. The badge is in place, hinged for quick-release and magna-lock.

The vault smells of petrolax and quinine. A cluster of overhead bulbs spill yellowed light – thick and sticky – across the curved, off-white walls.

Rodimus is a corpse in the centre of the room, so shadowed and ill defined that I think he will fade from sight any moment. I can taste the impermanence. He is fenced and anchored by shoulder-high stacks of life-support machines and monitors. They cluster round him like mourners, their faces lit with cardio-blips and sparkline scans, breathing electrode light towards the circuit slab and willing him to hold on. Like the walls around Iacon, they enclose and protect, keeping the real world out.

'You must be the student...'

The sound echoes from a mouth that looks like a bleached scar or tyre-burn.

'How are you feeling, commander Prime?'

He laughs as if I've made a bad joke. 'Nice to have a visitor.' His voice crackles like a stylus skimming shellac. 'What did you want to talk about?'

I notice for the first time that he's looking to my left, focusing on the space I've just vacated. He's time-delayed, doped-up and talking in slow motion, and my god, Springer, this is anything but a routine energon transfusion.

'I'm researching Decepticon history, examining the more, how can I say, *successful* commanders.'

That laugh again, jumping the groove. I'm scared to look at him directly in case he crumbles to dust.

'My mind is not what it once was, but I will try and be of service. Take a seat.'

I notice that the chair next to his slab is coated with a fine layer of dust. How long has it been since someone sat next to him?

'Where do you want me to begin?'

'Wherever you feel comfortable. I heard many things about Scorponok, but I never came into contact with him. Tell me, what was he like?'

The silence drags for so long I think he may be dead, in which case my journey here is academic in the other sense of the word. Then an optic glow grazes his cheek and he says, 'Perhaps, in the end, he changed his ways, but for far too long, Scorponok was as evil as they come.'

'Yes, but there are different *types* of evil, different aspects. In what *way* was Scorponok evil?' I unclip my datalog and stare at his chiselled profile. 'Give me an example.'

'Very well. It was 1991, I think. Yes – that was it... near to the end of the Decepticon civil war. At the time we thought he'd lost it – been driven mad by his injuries. We should have known better!'

And so I let him talk and talk and *talk*. He stares at his reflection in the surveillance cameras, shudders as precious energon (at least I *think* it's energon) is piped into his skeletal frame, and extols the vices of Galvatron, Shockwave and Megatron. I'm hardly listening – all I can think about is Unicron. To be truthful, I felt Him near when I first entered the chamber, infinitely close yet perpetually out of reach. And so while my audionet records Prime's every fractured syllable, my mind is reaching out to Him, waiting for the breakthrough.

It doesn't come.

When Rodimus finally speaks of Unicron, I expect a sign. Okay, so I didn't think Our Lord would come bursting out of his crippled frame, howling for vengeance, but a clue would have been nice – a spluttering life-support or a staccato bulb. But no. Nothing. I try to goad him – 'Hah! You're making it up as you go along! How could one such as you have bested Unicron?' – but the old fool is too sedated to react. Oh well. Time for Plan B.

‘And now I really must refer you to the main screen, commander.’

Star Saber swivelled in his chair and watched the static settle into an aerial view of the medivault. The second-hand sound was piped into the command chamber like frictionless muzak.

‘I was just thinking, Great Shot. About the Turning.’

‘—Senile old fool! Your memory’s playing tricks on you! I come here—’

‘Like I said, commander, It is a source of considerable concern among the older Autobots.’

‘—to find out about Unicron and I get a lecture on some evil has-beens and a work of fiction!’

‘You misunderstand. The student’s datalog reminds me how much faith my people put in prophecy. Faith they should be putting in me.’

‘Well get this, Autobot fool! I’m going to find Unicron myself, and when I do, you’ll really understand the meaning of evil!’

Great Shot gestured to the main screen. ‘Here you see him tearing off his Autobot symbol and throwing it on the floor. Wheeljack believes that the detonator was primed the moment the screw threads made contact with the floor. Countdown begins... now.’

On screen, Rodimus Prime closed his eyes and howled at the ceiling. Great Shot followed the action with his finger.

‘Prime has his fit, the guard comes rushing in, and *bang!* The bomb detonates.’

The screen went blank and Star Saber nodded soberly. ‘One dead guard.’

‘And by this time, our would-be Primal assassin has escaped back here by running through the transmat...’

‘...And breaking out of the Ministry. Which,’ Star Saber stretched to his full height, ‘I thought was impossible.’

‘We’re not used to people trying to break *out* of here, commander. Besides, the Creationist riot didn’t help. They swarmed the entrance after someone exploded Primon’s supposed birthscar.’

‘I’ve heard all the excuses – even the one about the border guard being bribed to let him into the Rad Zone.’ The enormous Autobot cracked the joints in his fingers, staring at his feet. ‘Dammit, Great Shot, *everything* hinges on us tracking him down. If the Autobots think I can’t apprehend the person who murdered their friend, Springer will have all the leverage he needs to--’

‘Commander. I’m sorry to interrupt, but...’ he pressed his audio receptor to end transmission. ‘...the research team has just returned from his hab-unit. They’ve found something.’

‘Yes?’

‘A horned helmet, the type worn by the Brotherhood of Chaos. The Unicron cult, commander: he’s one of them.’

Personal Datalog V2.0

Online +++ Commence dataflow:

I dropped the datalog pad pushing through the rioters, so for the time being this is being recorded internally. The guard – an old friend whose life I saved during the Badlands Skirmish in 2150 – is surprised when I offer him five thousand shanix, but ushers me through the border gates without argument. I’m ill prepared for the dry ice and twister winds that sting my optics and drive mechs dust down my vocal aperture.

At least the horror stories aren’t true. The Rad Zone has not expanded in quite the way High Command described, with their alarmist Deterioration Updates and Climate Warnings. Trekking towards the rendezvous point in Eocra I see no molten veins dissecting the osmium slopes, no pale lightning needling the peaks in the distance. The ground is parched and patterned with fracture lines, and great areas are smeared with ancient ash, but otherwise the outside world has changed very little since I was carried through the city gates twenty years ago, slumped over Triton’s shoulder. Perhaps I should have left a message for him before I escaped. After all, he saved my life – he found me laying facedown in Ibex in 2316 after I was ambushed by Viroids looking for clean oil. He became an ambassador in the end, always leaving Iacon on ‘mercy missions’. Rumour has it that Triton rescued many Autobots from body-dumps and long-forgotten subterranean settlements, many of whom are now in positions of considerable responsibility.

Thinking of Triton sets my mind wandering. I can count my friends on one hand, but perhaps that is for the best. If all goes well over the next few decadorns, every one of them will be dead.

Ironically, the annihilation of all life has always been the hardest Unicronian doctrine to justify, but the Brotherhood have always been patient, and use the ancient scriptures to expound the purity of the message. Life, they say, is an obstacle, a barrier between Him and us. The Lifestain brings order to a universe that should resonate with the purity of chaos, and separates Subject from Master. When the Dark Lord returns – very soon, if the prophecies are accurate – he will instigate the Final Purge, destroy all Life, and elevate His loyal followers to the states of Dark Gods – we will exist as metabeings alongside Akra, Syncorax, Kryn and Harbinger. There are a lot of capitals and eponyms in the ancient texts, and many of the central tenets are conceptually stertorous, but I was converted by the Brotherhood's vehemence and passion.

Eocra is a small, long-abandoned settlement in a wide-open space, little more than a crop of rundown buildings, sandblasted pastel-pink and rich with rad-soak. It's famous for a so-called 'time-lapse' in 2013 but little else. I see that someone is waiting for me in the main civic building. He wears a chain-mail cloak that spools around his feet, and his optics smoulder and fluoresce behind the Unicronian mask. I do not recognise this Brother, but then we are many, and I have so far mixed only with members of my local congregation. I tap my head to indicate the secrets inside. 'Servion is expecting me. I have news of the Gateway.'

He steps aside to reveal a stairway curving deep below ground. Stepping into the soft-focus darkness I feel a delicious chill lace my circuitry and imagine the ceremonies that await. My Brother follows close behind, muttering into his hands – the Truthbearers are forever quoting scripture. I turn into a side-door and the shock hits me in three stages, three sense-jabs:

- There is a window, wide and rectangular, and yet we're below ground
- Through the window are star-fields and gas patterns, and the gentle grey curvature of Cybertron (hell, I can see the Proton Crater)

- The room is full of Decepticons, and I recognise them all.

'We were beginning to lose hope,' says Onslaught, who removes his helmet and cloak. 'But then you did have a long way to travel.' I must be staring into space – literally – because he adds, 'You're in orbit, inside a cloaked Decepticon satellite. The door you just walked through is a teleport slab.'

'Where's Servion?' I ask optimistically. I'm not afraid, not *really*. Perhaps I should be.

'Servion?'

'The High Priest,' explains Razorclaw. 'You know – uptight, delusional, addicted to Syk.'

'Oh, him. Probably ransacking your hab-unit, looking for you and your report.'

'You know about that?'

'It's why we brought you here,' says Blitzwing. 'We know of your penchant for gathering illicit information. We operate in the same way, you see – networks of informers, double agents so firmly planted they don't even know they're on our side.'

Onslaught waves his hand dismissively ('Shut up, Blitzwing.') and turns to me. 'Give me the interview transcription.'

'My thesis?' The hard ess escapes by voxbox to the sound of laser-cannons being unlocked and cocked in my direction. 'Sure. Take it.'

I make a few neural connections and drag a data-slug from my cranial casing. It's nestling in Onslaught's palm before the shocked smile fades from his face.

'Just like that? No fight?'

I shrug. 'What's the point?'

'In that case,' says the Combaticon, 'you're free to go. Thank you for, er, your co-operation.'

And now it hits me – no fanfare, no epiphany, just a simple, rational realisation: I hate the Autobots, I hate the idea of total annihilation, I'm wanted by High Command, Servion, the Creationists, and no doubt the packs of Muties, Emps and Viroids waiting for me outside. So I turn to Razorclaw and say, 'I want to be a Decepticon.'

Silence. Glances are exchanged, and I know they're communicating internally. Eventually, Razorclaw says, 'We'll be in touch,' and I'm ushered through the teleporter, up the stairs, and back outside.

It's sunset now. A meniscus of light settles on the horizon and the sky bleeds itself black. I imagine the Decepticon satellite making invisible rings around Cybertron. Perhaps there are hundreds of them up there, cruising the mesosphere, keeping quiet vigil over the populace.

I can't go back to Iacon. Star Saber will kill me, unless Springer gets there first. Within joors of my betrayal being broadcast (and I know it will – these rumour mills grind day and night) every member of the Brotherhood will be after me. Even if I get a new bodyshell and disguise myself (perhaps I'll downsize to conserve energy), I don't want to go back. Where can I go until the Decepticons make contact?

Well. There is *somewhere* I could go – if it really exists. Not far from here, in fact just a few hundred hics away, is the Kalisian border. Maybe I'll make the journey and see if all the rumours are true.

+++ *Stem dataflow*

'I told you we wouldn't need our weapons,' said Blitzwing, plotting a course for New Helex. 'I knew he'd comply.'

Razorclaw nodded. 'That's what core programming does for you.'

'Oh yeah,' said Onslaught. 'I forgot he was one of ours. A recent one, right?'

'Post-Treaty. Last batch of Neogens.' Blitzwing made the necessary mental arithmetic. 'He'd have come on-line in 2316. One of Triton's deep-placements. It's about time we started recalling the rest of them, actually. You know, in preparation...'

'I like him,' said Razorclaw. 'He'll go far. In fact, if he maintains that level of duplicity, he'll probably outlive us all.'

Blitzwing smiled. 'Remind me to make a recommendation to Galvatron. What was his name again?'

'Tarantulus.'

Galvatron sat low, black-eyed and saturnine in the artificial light. Shallow dents traced his quiescent posture – he had reclined on his throne for too long.

Alone as always, he willed himself towards temporary systems shutdown. Perhaps on that sensory knife-edge, that tremulous oblique between on/off-line, he would suffer the vision again, and the room would twist and fold as it had done before, the walls blurring into fantastic shapes. Perhaps he would look up and see outline, movement, shadowfall – and Unicron would be with him once more, inside his eyes and ears and mouth, telling him of things to come.

Was he playing the servant even now? He had, after all, ordered Onslaught to contact their Brotherhood plant within seconds of the first visitation. Now, sixty orns later, he had confirmation that Rodimus was dying, that his nemesis was tethered to a med-slab and stashed away on Earth. The transcription had vanquished all doubts – the Final Purge was imminent, and Prime was the Gateway.

The ailing Autobot's self-aggrandising parables had been fussy and equivocal, plagued by inaccurate dates and trite morality, but they had nevertheless described a shared past that now seemed depressingly remote. He remembered, as Megatron, murdering the Autobot spy, 'Warmonger', in 1990; reading reports of Scorponok evading the Air Strike Patrol a few months later; punishing Shockwave for the unsanctioned attack on Autobot City in 2004. Most bitterly of all, he remembered losing consciousness as Unicron tore through Cybertron in 2010. It was ironic, then, that the one story he could not relate to was the one illustrating his own brand of evil – he had never decapitated Blurr, stormed into Autobot City and attacked Rodimus.

He'd put the fairytale down to senility – a dying Autobot sewing anti-Decepticon propaganda – before remembering Prime's sojourn in an alternate universe after the Time Wars. The story, *ergo*, dealt with an alternate Galvatron; a Galvatron he had not become (Not for the first time, he wondered how many variants and doppelgangers were skimming across perpendicular timelines – an infinite army of one, splitting and dividing, occupying every moment of Past, Present and Future). The alternate Galvatron had tried to subvert the Matrix by appealing to Prime's savage, murderous instincts. He had theorised, correctly it seemed, that by provoking base emotions in the Matrix Bearer the Lifecode would become tainted and susceptible to outside influence.

It was a quaint idea. And with Prime crippled and desperate, rallying against the injustice of his condition, it was a workable idea. He smiled, stood up, and stretched.

Second time lucky.

Great Shot stepped from the vacuum lift and saw Star Saber brooding by the altar.

‘I thought I’d find you down here, commander.’

‘Is it done?’

‘Yes. I spoke to Springer directly and described how the border guards gunned the student down before he could scale the city walls.’

‘And he believes you?’

‘Of course.’ Great Shot balanced on the lip of the altar. ‘Nothing’s changed here, then?’

‘You can’t turn back the Turning – at least that’s what the theoscientists keep telling me.’

‘Worried, commander?’

‘On the contrary. This episode might work in my favour.’

‘Certainly. You’ve removed a rogue Autobot – Rodimus Prime’s would-be assassin.’

‘Hmm. I’ve been thinking about that – the time bomb, the explosion. It’s a shame about the dead guard – what was his name?’

‘Smokescreen, I believe.’

‘Yes, Smokescreen. Most unfortunate.’

‘Absolutely, commander. I understand he was a most courageous and loyal Autobot.’

‘No, I mean it’s a shame that he got between Prime and the blast.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Nothing. Forget it.’

Star Saber took one last look at the altar and stepped into the vacuum lift, holding the door open until his lieutenant did the same. While they were sucked to the surface the walls of the Primal Chamber continued to swarm with muted, inky shapes, and the Matrix Flame continued to burn a stark and dolorous black.